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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE--SOME CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE ORGANIZATION AND ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING PRACTICE FOR PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS.

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DESCRIPTORS- *ENGLISH (SECOND LANGUAGE), *TEACHING METHODS, *TEACHER EDUCATION, *STUDENT TEACHING,

THE AUTHOR DISCUSSES THE "PRACTICE CLASS" AS IT IS IMPLEMENTED IN THE FINAL YEAR OF THE FIVE-YEAR COURSE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF TRUJILLO. THE PERUVIAN STUDENT-TEACHER (WITH 56 HOURS OF THEORETICAL INSTRUCTION, IN ADDITION TO A BACKGROUND IN LINGUISTICS), CONDUCTS A MINIMUM OF 15 ONE-HOUR PRACTICE CLASSES APPROVED AND SUPERVISED BY APPOINTED MEMBERS OF THE STAFF. THE PRACTICE CLASSES ARE CARRIED OUT IN LOCAL SECONDARY SCHOOLS WITH GROUPS OF 25 TO 40 BOYS OR GIRLS WHOSE AGES RANGE FROM 11 TO 19. A SUPERVISOR ("TUTOR") OBSERVES AND LATER DISCUSSES HIS OBSERVATIONS WITH THE TRAINEE AND OTHER TRAINEES WHO MAY BE OBSERVING. A CULMINATING CLASS SESSION IS CONDUCTED BEFORE A JURY OF THREE--TWO TUTORS AND THE HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT. A SECRET BALLOT DETERMINES PASSING OR FAILING. THE OTHER PROCEEDINGS (CARRIED OUT IN ENGLISH) ARE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC, ACCORDING TO A UNIVERSITY REGULATION. THE AUTHOR ALSO DISCUSSES RECENT IMPROVEMENTS IN THE LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT WHICH HAVE A WIDE RANGE OF APPLICABILITY. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LENGUAJE Y CIENCIAS," NUMBER 25, SEPTEMBER 1967 PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE TRUJILLO IN TRUJILLO, PERU. (AMM)

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Alun L. W. Rees:

From Theory to Practice - Some Critical Observations on the Organization and Assessment of Teaching Practice for Prospective English Language Teachers

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The student undergoing the five-year course for secondary-school teachers of English offered by the National University of Trujillo, approaches his fifth and graduation year with fifty-six hours of theoretical instruction in methodology behind him, supplemented by a grounding in linguistics (see publication N°22 for full details of syllabus). These are designed to lay the groundwork on which he can base the presentation of preliminary classes in the subject he has been specializing in during the previous four years. One of the important objectives of the final year of study is consequently to furnish the opportunity for him to apply this theoretical knowledge to the real situation of the classroom. This is implemented by the time-honoured practice class.

The Practice Class

Under the regulations laid down by the University, each trainee must supply satisfactory evidence of his promise as a teacher by conducting a minimum of fifteen, one-hour practice classes approved and supervised by appointed members of staff. This means in effect that persistent unsatisfactory work would bring about an initial extension of the customary period and lead to disqualification if no marked improvement were forthcoming.

Practice classes are carried out in local secondary schools with single-sex groups of from twenty-five to forty boys or girls. The levels vary from first to fifth grades which includes children between the ages of eleven and nineteen. The student teacher neither faces the

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same class on each occasion nor necessarily visits the same school, so that he is obliged to continue each lesson from the point at which the regular teacher has left off.

Before the class the trainee hands the supervisor a lesson plan outlining the material to be covered and details of the procedures he intends to follow, together with a list of any aids he will employ. Throughout the succeeding class the supervisor makes his presence as unobtrusive as conditions will allow; he sits at the back of the room jotting down his observations, but refrains from interfering with the progress of the lesson in any way. After the hour, the tutor and student, together with one or perhaps two fellow-students who have been granted permission to sit in, withdraw to discuss the previous performance. This informal evaluation is conducted entirely in English and would reveal to an eavesdropper the close personal contact that has been developed between trainer and trainee. Care is taken to ensure that the student-teacher feels he is being considered and consulted rather than reprimanded in terms of what the supervisor might somewhat arbitrarily regard as right or wrong. In respect to this facet of his work the staff member would be more accurately described as a counsellor.

Reasons of courtesy would dictate that the regular teacher should be invited to attend the subsequent discussion. Unfortunately, in many cases an inability to speak English constitutes a serious drawback both as regards the possibility of active participation and a favourable disposition towards oral methods of instruction. Hence this is not included as a standard feature of the present programme, though the open invitation still stands.

A period of student self-appraisal begins the evaluation. This is evidence of the basic aim of not imposing an external, professional judgement upon the future teacher but to encourage him to develop his own criteria so that he can pinpoint any unpredicted shortcomings in his classes and suggest his own appropriate remedies. Only when the student has exhausted his ideas does the tutor forward any further suggestions and advice.

As one might expect, it has been found in practice that the student tends to be on the defensive at first and siezes the opportunity

to spout forth an indignant eulogy of self-vindication. The attitude of the tutor is therefore of great consequence at this stage, and an understanding approach is essential in preparing the way for more objective and profitable self-appraisals in the future.

Finally, the supervisor fills in the corresponding entry on the student's personal record-sheet by marking a grade ranging from 'satisfactory' to 'very good' and adds some general comments, either favourable or otherwise, on any outstanding features of the lesson. The entry is made and justified in the presence of the student, supplying further evidence of the effort made to divest the training procedure of any air of the esoteric or mystery of craft - that English language teaching is somehow achieved by miraculous 'methods' and 'techniques' jealously guarded by the initiated. This is particularly necessary in a country still in the grip of the traditional approach to language teaching and learning, and where oral methods and their advocates are looked upon with a mixture of awe and perhaps even fear, as one might regard the arrival in the neighbourhood of some outlandish sect and the disseminating of their bizarre creed.

The culmination of the term of teaching practice takes on the form of a class conducted before a jury of three, consisting of two tutors and the Head of Department. This involves night-school pupils on the University premises who have not necessarily been taught by the student-teacher on any previous occasion.

After the final bell the student and examiners retire to another room where the former, after first tendering his own comments, is questioned by the panel and induced to enlarge on topics occasioned by the class. The viva-voca examination is in essence a more formal version of the customary practice class 'post-mortem'.

Following this, the members of the examining board confer in private; they consult the student's record of studies over the previous five years and his progress throughout the teaching practice before considering his recent performance and ultimately casting their votes in a secret ballot. The result may be a pass or a failure either by the vote of the majority or by unanimous decision. All proceedings are carried on in English, and a University regulation stipulates that the public are to be freely admitted.

The successful and newly-trained teacher who assumes work in a secondary-school within the locality maintains an association with the University training programme. His co-operation may be sought in the provision of occasional practical class demonstration for current undergraduates. Furthermore, the Department staff and the facilities of a well-stocked library of works on linguistics and language teaching are always at his disposal for help and consultation. It frequently happens too, that a tutor is invited by a graduate teacher to visit one of his classes.

Improvements - Actual and Proposed

The five-year programme has been in operation for six and a half years, so that the second body of fully-trained teachers is due to complete the full course of study this term. We are therefore already in a position to embark upon preliminary examination of the present set-up, based on results so far obtained.

A characteristic of this Language Department is a constant preoccupation with the efficacy of its schemes, the result being a flexible system stemming from an empirical approach of experiment with a corollary process of rejecting, reforming, modifying and enlarging. The outcome is consequently dictated by a sound policy of internal evolution as opposed to the rash though perhaps well-meaning imposition or adaptation of some external or purely theoretical system which would vainly strive to mould to its own precepts the unique conditions prevalent in a Peruvian university.

In recent months various innovations have been introduced to help increase the effectiveness of the training. Student-teachers now have the benefit of an audio-visual library. Apart from containing suitable reading texts, this also incorporates an array of aids including a portable tape-recorder and prepared tapes, a slide-projector, a flannel-graph and cut-outs, a folding blackboard, wall-charts, picture postcards, posters, coloured chalk, and clock faces, together with assorted bric-a-brac ranging from all sizes of bottles to pipe-cleaners and toy plastic crocodiles; Students are encouraged to add their own contributions besides borrowing from this collection. Eventually it is hoped

to set aside space for establishing a workshop where further aids can be produced cheaply by the teachers in training themselves.

The prime mover behind the institution of this new service was the growing need to implant a notion that simple, portable aids should not only be varied - the pupil soon tires of pens, pencils and rulers - but also as much part of classroom equipment as the versatile blackboard and chalk, and definitely not some kind of gimmicry to be resorted to in the presence of the supervisor. Also, merely mulling over a set of aids frequently engenders inspiration for the effective presentation of some new item to be taught.

In the course of the last term, selections from several practice classes were recorded on a portable tape-recorder. The development of each class was not, as one might suppose, recorded in its entirety to be replayed to the trainee with frequent breaks for criticism. Without being simultaneously supplemented by film, this would entail a tedious, fruitless and possibly discouraging procedure, fraught with long pauses and exaggerated hesitance, no more than but partially embracing the manifold aspects of successful instruction. Instead, extracts of model performances, particularly when they included polished chorus work which tends to be accentuated on tape, were filed for the orientation of future trainees or for bolstering the flagging spirits of the student occasionally abashed by the difficulties encountered when applying oral methods of language teaching for the first time in an unfamiliar classroom. The cryptic comment, "They laughed" is the usual complaint voiced by the discomfited student-teacher after what must appear to his startled pupils as an hour's cavorting around the classroom; Recordings of successful oral work go a long way in convincing him of the value of patience and persistence.

Experience has also revealed that recorded examples of recurring errors in pronunciation, intonation or structure which even the most competent student may fall into unawares when using his command of the language in the unaccustomed role of teacher, can often be eradicated by bringing them to the student's notice so convincingly.

Emphasis on a few important details, aided where feasible by faithful mechanical reproduction, appears to be much more stimulating and

conducive to improvement than the stifling and disparaging effects produced by a cluttered, comprehensive criticism. As a matter of assessment technique, a visiting Canadian Professor of Education - strongly under the influence of B.F. Skinner, one suspects - has even proposed that only successful aspects of the trainee's class should be brought up for reinforcement by the tutor's approval. Other, less favourable features would be ignored on the grounds of not serving to inculcate the desired behavioural responses. This thought-provoking, though by no means novel hypothesis, is at present undergoing limited trial pending further clarification concerning the precise details of its practical application to the task in hand.

A further move to consolidate the arrangement for teaching practice is evidenced by the current drawing-up of a standardized printed form in place of the previous rather inadequate lesson plan formulated by the student on a loose sheet of paper for the guidance of the supervisor. Questions on specific topics, graded step by step and demanding straightforward answers,will avoid the prevalent tendency to gloss over essential details with a repetition of vague generalizations and platitudes in which clichés such as, 'to establish correct language habits', 'training to listen and to understand', and the questionable, 'to teach the pupils to think in a foreign language' figure prominently. It is hoped that this new feature will elicit an explicit report,thereby inducing the student to organize the contents of his lessons in a more deliberate and systematic fashion, as well as furnishing a solid framework for post-class discussion, especially in highlighting any skilful deviations prompted by student responses or incidental occurences in the classroom.

Up to now the trainee has been afforded no direct help by the tutor in preparing individual practice classes. This is consistent with the avowed aim of graduating teachers who are able to stand on their own feet. Unfortunately, this policy may have stultefying consequences when applied to the teacher who already stands at a disadvantage from the very fact that oral work obliges him to cope with a foreign tongue. Bearing this in mind it would perhaps be wiser for the tutor to play a large part in all aspects of the preparation of preliminary classes, gradually easing off as the student gains confidence.

A step in this direction is already contemplated by the compilation of a leaflet stating elementary techniques in classroom work which have proved themselves effective in past practice classes, in addition to those aspects tending to be consistently lacking in the initial stages - the appropriate use of gesture to accompany oral explanations, for example. This guide will provide practical and detailed advice which is beyond the scope of the essentially theoretical work involved in the previous lectures on methodology. It is also hoped to project the British Council series of twelve films under the general title of, 'View and Teach'.

Possible Modifications

So far the organization of the training programme has been described followed by sketches of actual improvements or those to be realized shortly. However, certain deficiences still remain to be tackled. In the forefront of these is the continual chopping and changing of classes which creates a clearly unrealistic system deprived of the continuity demanded by any successful teaching/learning situation. The root cause for this is the rigid adherence to the official school syllabus which headmasters are loathe to relax for extended periods, particularly as oral work retards the apparent progress achieved by out-moded methods of translation and the memorization of paradigms. Until such prejudices can be overcome, a formidable and detrimental obstacle somewhat mars the programme.

From time to time objections are raised relating to the validity of the supervised class,despite its widespread currency, on the grounds that the behaviour of pupils is affected by consciousness of an alien presence. Others maintain that they instigate dynamic and ostentatious displays on the part of the student-teacher, far from typical of his teaching under normal circumstances.

Such criticisms are justifiable to some extent. At least one North American university has acknowledged them by the construction of '...a classroom with a concealed observation gallery equipped with a one-way glass stretching most of the length of one wall, the ends being completed by a screen wire which lets the sound come through'. However, frequent

class vigilation by the supervisor tends to resolve the former difficulty for, ipso facto, he is no longer regarded by the children as an alien presence. The latter problem, which often stems in large part from the student's reaction to his self-consciousness, can be dealt with without resorting to expensive measures simply by establishing the right kind of trainer/trainee relationship so that the practice class in viewed in its true light, not as a test, but as a unique opportunity for the undergraduate to have individual professional guidance. In this respect the Language Department of the Univesity of Trujillo is fortunate in offering at present a graduate-year ratio of one tutor to four students.

A more severe criticism can be levelled against the final grading class and its public assessment by jury. As mitigating factors in seeking to uphold the present rigmarole, one may point out that the regulation demanding it was obviously formulated as a democratic means of counteracting any subsequent charges of unfair classification brought forward by the student who fails to graduate. Further vindication is provided by the fact that it undoubtedly constitutes a convenient though incidental platform from which to acclaim the progressive work of the Department. However, not only is one class insufficient to bear much weight in a final judgement, but also the fact that the student is thrust before an unfamiliar class and the public, renders the whole process meaningless as a valid ground for evaluation.

The institution of a secret ballot has its defects too in that it is so easily reduced to an affair in which the assessor casts his vote not strictly in accordance with his judgement of the candidate but in relation to the probable effects he supposes his personal vote will have on the corporate decision. For example, if examiner A decides that the candidate merits merely a pass by majority, and he expects examiners B and C to advocate a pass, then he may register a failure in the ballot box to counterbalance the others and thereby achieve the result he desires. Should either B or C by any chance not recommend a pass then the student would fail despite the fact that two assessors present considered that he deserved to pass.

Therefore, as is readily indicated, the final public performance is unreliable and out of keeping with the enlightened nature of the training programme in general.

As a postscript to this article it might be mentioned that when looking over the syllabi for many courses preparing teachers of English as a foreign/second language both in the Americas and Britain, one is often struck by Michael West's assertion (Teaching English under Difficult Circumstances) that, 'At present a rather ambitious course in phonetics, literature and the higher reaches of idiom and grammar is largely wasted on the teacher who goes back to work in the school where these things are not required'. Dr. West was not referring here to an extended university programme, nevertheless, this provokes the fundamental question as to whether or not in such schemes designed to train teachers there exists a glorification of the theoretical and intellectual at the expense of the practical and applied; whether or not, in fact, this exposition should have been entitled, not 'From Theory to Practice' but, 'From Practice to Theory', or even just, 'Practice'.

One may of course maintain with another authority that, 'We grant an important place to linguistics in a curriculum intended to prepare effective teachers because we hope that the individual teacher will be able to control his textbook rather than to let it dominate him', or agree with R.A.Close (What Qualifications do we need for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language? - English Language Teaching) that professional competence entails more than mere ability to speak English, combined with a knowledge a classroom techniques, and probably implies inherent factors that no amount of training could instil.

However, no matter how devious the route taken, competent training programmes all merge in their ultimate objective: that is to produce what Theodore Anderssen (Modern Language Journal - Oct.1963) defines as 'qualified' teachers as opposed to 'certified' ones who have merely served their time. This involves, above all, the fostering of such qualities as resourcefulness, self-reliance and individuality.

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